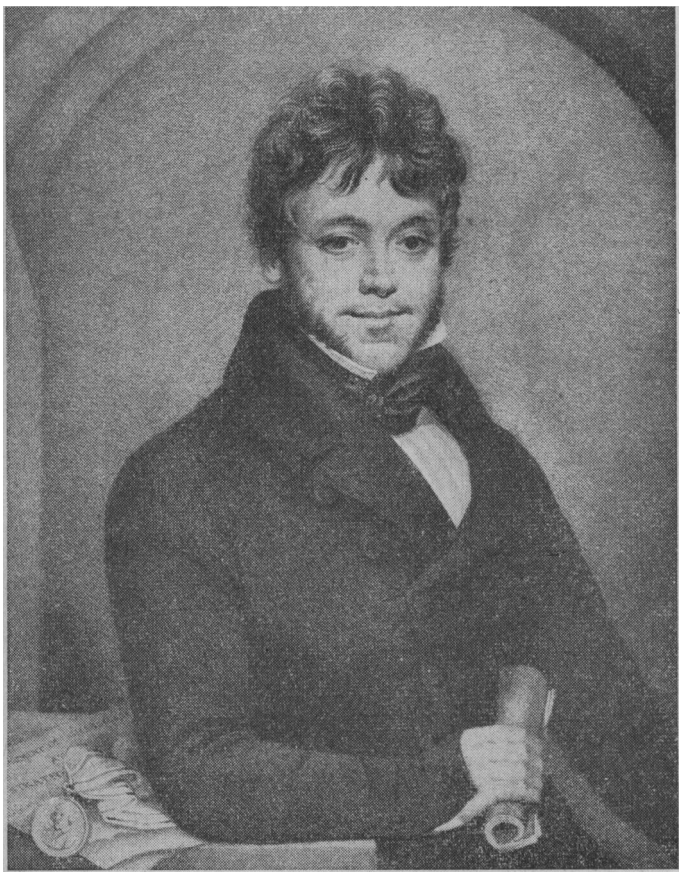
MEDICAL HISTORY

John Conolly (1794–1866)

[FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT]

A hundred years ago on 5 March John Conolly died from a recurrence of the cerebrovascular accident with which he had been stricken four years earlier. It appealed to his contemporaries that the stroke should have occurred after he had spent an hour weeping over the coffin of a favourite granddaughter. Certainly he was a man of great compassion, and his name has come down to us because he translated into action the sympathy increasingly felt from the beginning of the nineteenth century with the mentally ill, confined often under barbaric conditions in asylums.



John Conolly. (By courtesy of the Wellcome Trustees.)

Conolly was born on 27 May 1794 at Market Rasen in Lincolnshire, the son of a rootless Irishman who died soon after. He was sent to a boarding school in Yorkshire which sounds like another Dotheboys Hall. When he rejoined his family, who by then had moved to Hull, his mother had married a French émigré, from whom Conolly learned French (he later visited Paris and always took great interest in French literature). He joined a Cambridgeshire regiment of militia and it is said would have made a good soldier, but he acquired a wife and child and was obliged to settle down.

Student and Professor

In his late twenties Conolly went to Glasgow University and a year later to Edinburgh to read medicine. His M.D. thesis was on insanity—an unusual subject for the time—though we know that in Glasgow he had been impressed by visiting an asylum, and in Hull he knew Dr. William Ellis, who became famous as an alienist. Conolly practised for a time in Lewes, Sussex, and briefly also in Chichester, where he got to know John Forbes; there was not enough work for both of them, however, and he moved to Stratford-upon-Avon. Here he was more successful in practice and also very active in non-medical spheres, being a keen supporter of Shakespeare memorials and twice mayor.

When University College, London, was started Conolly became the first professor of medicine, possibly through acquaintance with Henry Brougham, one of the founders. He spent four years in this chair, much of them in diplomatic activity on behalf of his fellow professors, who seem to have been perpetually at odds with the administrators of the university. It has often been said that Conolly resigned his chair and left London because he failed to establish himself as a physician, but he was always trying to persuade the authorities that the professorship needed his whole-time efforts, and he cannot have been able to give much energy to building up a consultant practice. He also tried with little success to introduce clinical teaching in psychiatry.

Conolly then returned to general practice in Warwick, within reach of his beloved Stratford, and left there only when he was appointed superintendent of the Middlesex Asylum at Hanwell, now St. Bernard's Hospital, Southall. Here he immediately put into practice the management of patients without any physical restraint, which Pinel and his followers in France and the Tukes at the Retreat in York had introduced earlier in a smaller way. Now his many talents in propaganda, persuasive oratory, lucid writing, and tactful administration were focused on one object, and the movement for reform in mental hospitals owed an immense amount to his work.

Conolly was also a leading figure in the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association, and opposed its being renamed the British Medical Association. When it met in Oxford honorary degrees were conferred on Hastings, Forbes, and Conolly, and subsequently Hastings contributed to his obituary notice in the *B.M.J.* Conolly was also very active as an editor and pamphleteer.

Obituaries

Obituaries of Conolly were strangely deprecating about his ability as a physician.

"In spite of his great and varied talent, Dr. Conolly would never have attained any distinction as a general consulting physician: the defects of his early training, his desultory education, and the late period of his life at which he entered upon the study of medicine, combined to prevent his attaining any mastery of its principles, or ever feeling that pleasure in its practice without which no physician can hope to become famous."[1]

"Dr. Conolly's education as a physician was essentially deficient. He began the study of medicine too late in life ever thoroughly to love it as a profession or appreciate it as a science."[2]

He was also attacked in his lifetime—for example, by another zealous reformer, Charles Reade. In a novel about the iniquities of privately owned madhouses Reade pilloried Conolly as Dr. Whycherley, to the extent that Charles Dickens, in whose *Household Words* the novel was serialized, felt obliged to insert an editorial disclaimer, for Conolly was his personal friend.[3] But a successful reformer always creates hostility, even among his friends. Conolly left two psychiatrist sons-in-law to maintain his tradition—Dr. Harrington Tuke (not related to the Quaker Tukes of the Retreat) and Dr. Henry Maudsley.

REFERENCES

[1] *Lancet*, 1866, 1, 303.
[2] *Brit. med. J.*, 1866, 1, 288.
[3] *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 August 1961.